# UNLEASHED FROM THE SHACKLES: MODERN MEDIA'S PORTRAYALS OF MENTAL ILLNESS: UNITED STATES OF TARA

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# Unleashed from the Shackles: Modern Media's Portrayals of Mental Illness: United States of Tara

by
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**Introduction**

"[With mental illness] you get a real sense of shame, because your friends go, 'Oh come on, show me the lump, show me the x-rays,' and of course you've got nothing to show," stated famous comedian Ruby Wax. A longtime sufferer of depression, Ruby Wax shares her experiences with others by advocating mental health awareness through television shows and support groups. Wax was one of many other speakers included in Technology Entertainment Design's (TED's) All Kinds of Minds segment. Elyn Saks, another speaker within this segment, overcame many challenges in spite of her condition of chronic schizophrenia. A Yale graduate, Saks is now a professor at the University of Southern California's School of Law, specializing in mental health law. She also has publications and has written many books. Although Saks was previously hospitalized because of her schizophrenia, she proves with a good support system and treatment, a person with mental illness is as capable as anyone else to reach their goals. TED's segment incorporated inspirational stories to escape the lingering stigmas of mental illness. Instead of judging people with mental illness, TED's All Kinds of Minds provided an avenue for people to learn about those who struggle with mental illness along with their success stories too.

Even though TED embraced mental illness in a positive light, it was not always viewed favorably. Until recently, mental illness was heavily stigmatized in the American society. People would not reveal their illness in fear of preconceptions attached to it. Although not as prevalent, mental illness can still be negatively portrayed today (Nairn, 2007). One reason for the decrease in stigmas of mental illness is because mental illness is becoming more commonplace, which may be a result of the increased medicalization

of our society (Gosden, 1997). The government continues to approve more and more psychological illnesses, which gives doctors the necessary means to label a behavior as a disease and prescribe medications (Gosden, 1997). With such an increase, it can make one wonder if sane, normal people exist anymore. Medication is capable of making life easier, but some experts theorize that -people are scared of facing pain, death and simply--the reality--which is all part of the experience of life itself.

Through a textual analysis of television text and visual symbols, this study examines how modern day media portrays ideas and concepts about mental illness. A majority of early research entailed movies and television shows from the twentieth century, but this paper deals with a recent show, *United States of Tara (UST),* to see if perpetual stigmas of mental illness still exist. *United States of Tara* was a primetime comedy-drama series broadcasted on Showtime from January 2009 to June 2011. The show was about a woman who suffers from Multi-Personality Disorder (MPD), which is more recently known as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). The purpose of this study is to see how *UST* uses semiotics and framing to communicate mental illness to its audience.

**Historical Perceptions of Mental Illness**

Responsible for more hospital admissions than any other disease today, mental illness was not always a mainstream diagnosis in American society. Originally stemming from ideas brought by European colonists in the eighteenth century, people characterized with any form of mental illness were feared by the public. Insane, lunatic, mad and deranged were a few of the labels used to describe the mentally ill (Wingfield, 2003). Not only were the mentally ill misunderstood, but they were mistreated as well. People with mental illnesses were confined to workhouses with other deviant groups in an effort to hide them from the rest of the community. Bedlam, an infamous psychiatric hospital in London, was where mentally ill were housed. During the Medieval time period, Londoners would pay money to provoke the mentally ill to more crazed behavior (Mental Illness, 2007). In addition to being confined, they had to abide by laws that were believed to rid them of their disorder. Some of these treatments included detention from the community, bleeding, vomiting, excretion, uterus removal, hot and cold showers, and whipping and chaining (Wingfield, 2003). Back then, it was thought that mentally ill individuals were afflicted by spirits or being punished for immoral living. Therefore, people believed these treatments would relieve them of their sickness. Once people realized the old techniques were not effective, new treatments were developed.

Moral therapy was a new treatment that came about around the late eighteenth century. Moral therapy involved isolating the mad in a structural environment at a mental institution. There, they would be scolded for inappropriate behavior; this was in hopes that the patients would become sane again and regain the ability to enter regular society (Wingfield, 2003). This seemed like a good idea until public mental institutions were

introduced. Unlike private mental institutions, public institutions could not reject anyone from treatment. There were many flaws that came with this new system. One was overpopulation, which led to lack of funding and treatment resources. Workers at these institutions were unable to provide the patients with the amount of attention that was necessary for improvement of their patients. Additionally, the staff was agents of the negative societal attitudes and lacked clinical practice (Wingfield, 2003). This caused people to lose hope in the once optimistic vision of moral therapy. Giving up on the hope that there was a cure for the mad, people became satisfied with confining them to asylums away from the rest of society. This method of social order continued until the 1960s.

Although mental illness carries a social stigma, it is has dramatically improved compared to four centuries ago. People now feel comfortable discussing mental illness through public media; it has become a source of Interest for talk shows, Internet blogs and newspaper advice columns, because people are able to share their stories to the public audience (Wingfield, 2003).

**Factors Leading to Medicalization of Mental Illness**

Over the past few centuries, society's perceptions of mental illness changed greatly, due to advancements in medical science. Physically or psychologically onset, mental illnesses can affect an individual's ability to function according to cultural expectations (Mental Illness, 2007). The spectrum of mental disorders can span anywhere from people with personality disorders to people with chronic illnesses, such as schizophrenia. According to World Health, mental illnesses cost the United States more

than 150 billion dollars a year to hospitalize and provide specialized treatments for patients (Mental Illness, 2007). From the existence of only twenty-two mental disorders in the twentieth century, its leap to over three-hundred disorders in today's Diagnostic Statistical Manual can cause us to speculate the changes that American society has undergone.

Medicalization occurs when society classifies normal behaviors and bodily functions from their natural state into a disease state (Low Dog, 2011). A number of social factors have contributed to the medicalization of American society. One reason is because many people today are not as religious as they once were. In America, this ranges from people who claim they have no religious affiliation to the decline in the amount of time spent practicing on their own (Nones, 2012). This decrease in religious faiths has led people to increase their faith in science, and rely on experts rather than a religious deity (Conrad, 1992). The power and prestige attained by the medical field in the 1900s allowed the medical profession to gain great cultural influence and authority over the public (Freidson, 1970). With power came monopolization because there was not another field that eased people's pain and sickness like the medical field. Naturally, power enabled the medical profession to exploit the public, creating diseases or claims that medication is needed. In reality, this caused people to undermine confidence in their own body to heal itself, leading them to dependence on medical treatments. Today, people lack the willingness to endure natural body states and minor physical distress, believing that their main solution to their problems is found in some form of medication or intervention (Conrad, 2004).

Lastly, the advent of media such as the television and Internet has overwhelmed our society with information. All one needs is access to a computer, and with it, anybody can become an expert on any topic. It has facilitated consumer involvement by offering easily accessible health-related information (Conrad, 2004). Search engines have enabled people to perform self-diagnosis. Whenever people feel ill, they can type their symptoms into Google or WebMd and treatment suggestions show up immediately at their fingertips. In addition, people can identify with symptoms and character behavior stated on a television show. This easy and yet accessible information has allowed patients to assume more knowledge, become demanding and critical of medical care (Conrad, 2004). Therefore, instead of a patient letting a physician do their job in diagnosing, a patient will now go into a physician's office identifying their own disease.

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that mental illness became a part of medicine. Mental health treatments consist of either psychotropic medications, drugs acting on the nervous system, or counseling. Before today's use of psychotropic drugs (1937-1940), therapies consisted of Metrazol, insulin and electric shock (Wingfield, 2003). As one can imagine, these therapies posed some risk to the patients, causing them to have muscle spasms. Within the 1950s, the discovery of a new solution arose, psychotropic drugs. When taken, psychotropic drugs, such as chlorpromazine, gave patients the freedom to function in normal society rather than confined to mental institutions. This was not a cure, but alleviated most symptoms. Chlorpromazine completely changed the face of mental health, paving the way for more antipsychotic, antimanic and antidepressant drugs (Mental Illness, 2007).

**The Media and Mental Health**

Past research demonstrates the media's tendency to portray mental illness negatively (Nairn, 2007). Through the news, television programs and movies, media has continuously found a way to further perpetuate the social stigmas of the mentally ill. In the news, journalists are only concerned with making a good story. They become so focused on selling the news that they sensationalize stories to provoke public interest and excitement. In order to spark public interest within a news story, journalists look to incorporate conflict and controversy. As a result, people with mental illnesses are given bad reputations. Because the negative stories tend to be more interesting to the audience, they are the ones that get reported the most often, and they are the ones that shape the public's view, depicting the mentally ill as having violent, delusional and irrational behavior (Stuart, 2006). However, when a positive event happens, it is overlooked or receives little press. This is because a single dramatic event has the power to overshadow positive news stories and anchor cultural fears (Stuart, 2006). Journalists also implement frames so the audience can understand their message. When the audience is interpreting a story, they draw on their past experiences reinforcing the negative cultural stereotypes of the mentally ill. Although these images of the mentally ill are inaccurate, they still persist.

Characters afflicted with mental illness in movies and television were associated with negative images and connotations as well. Their personalities distinguished by derision, amusement, fear and isolation from their communities, and they were more likely to be found committing murders or hurting others more than normal characters (Stuart, 2006). To enhance the point of view of a mentally ill person, filmmakers gave

them unattractive features (rotting teeth and unruly hair), and utilized inharmonious music, atmospheric lighting and scene juxtapositions throughout their presence (Pirkis, 2006). Scenes with forced confinement, electroshock and psychosurgery displayed treatments of the mentally ill unfavorably. Images of these inhumane treatments caused the doctors to be reflected poorly. All of these messages built up more fear in the audience.

This negatively misleading information presented in the news and films can have damaging effects to society. It can impair the self-esteem of a mentally ill person, decrease the likelihood that people will seek help for mental disorders when needed and inhibit their ability to recover (Rasmussen, 2013). If the only thing that viewers see is the images on television, then they will likely believe biases and stigmas, creating a discriminating community.

Despite the majority of negative work presented in the media about the mentally ill, there are some potential advantages to media as well. In some cases people who have a mental illness do not seek professional help, which can be either for financial reasons, lack of access to healthcare, concerns about confidentiality or social stigmas (Rasmussen, 2013). Therefore, shows like Dr. Phil can be useful alternatives in spreading helpful information. They can properly educate the patients informing them on how to diagnose themselves (Rasmussen, 2013). There is a need to accurately counter the negative representations of mental health in media. Doing so would improve the common misconceptions, show mentally ill in a positive light and educate the public (Pirkis, 2006).

**Framing**

How people interpret messages is dependent upon the frame. Framing occurs when certain aspects of a perceived reality are selected and made more prominent (Entman, 1993). The media frames by highlighting events that are the subject of communication. Through this highlighting, the subject becomes more obvious. There are different ways the media highlights. A subject's prominence depends on its placement, repetition or association of culturally familiar symbols (Entman, 1993). There are four different locations within communicating in the framing process: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. For the media, communicators make decisions, consciously or unconsciously, on how an idea is to be perceived by the audience. These decisions are usually guided by belief systems. The texts are the frames themselves. In all cultures, the presence or absence of key words, phrases, stereotyped images create frames. These concepts help to strengthen the ideas being communicated. The receiver is next. This is the opinion made by the receiver according to the effectiveness of the frames from the text. Finally, each culture has themes common to them. Generally speaking, people who have similar cultural backgrounds can be led to common conclusions when presented with certain frames. This is because their society frames subjects in the same way. But if one were to go outside of their culture, they would learn that there are different ways of interpreting the same message. Frames are important to consider amongst the audience because it is not only what is shown to the audience that needs to be considered, but also what is not being shown to the audience that can shape the audiences opinion as well (Entman, 1993). Framing plays an important role in setting cultural views. Although it takes repetition for frames to become embedded in people's

way of thinking, once they are there, it is difficult to change them, even if the truth is at stake (Lakoff, 2003). Frames have important implications for public understanding and evaluations of issues (Semetko, 2000); they become so anchored in thinking that people do not realize them. Through these techniques, framing works to shape the audiences' interpretations.

Robert Entman used framing theory in previous content analysis studies to understand media's influence on political power. Maintaining the power of cultural ideals allowed politicians to control governmental policies and make important decisions about the country. It was found whichever party held the most financial resources were able to hire skilled media management and corporate advertisers to advance their interests. With the ability to create frames through the media, the audience can be tacitly influenced through underlying messages. Entman's research suggests when frames are in the right places, political officials become more powerful and free to do what they want, whereas those who lose the framing contest in the media become weaker (Entman, 2007). Whoever is in control of the American democracy has the power to shape the public's opinion on political issues. Overall, this study proved the effectiveness of framing. Although framing theory was being used in politics, it can also be applied to how other ideas are conveyed in the media.

Framing theory can be used to understand what screenwriters convey about mental illness in *UST*. With Tara's DID condition, she transitioned into different alternate personalities (alters), which affected her everyday life. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the prominence of Tara's actions during her altered states. This shows whether the presence of Tara's actions were positive or negative, and what causes these transitions

to her altered states. Tara's actions, as a mentally ill character, transmit messages to the audience of how a mentally ill person acts in real life. If people in the audience never interacted with a mentally ill person, then watching *UST* is the only place to draw their knowledge in reference of a mentally ill person. How the mental illness is portrayed in the show can influence the audiences' interpretation, either true or skewed when compared to reality. Also, the triggers of Tara's alters to arise are shown. The effects of Tara's mental illness on her life as well as others around her involve framing theory as well. This interpretation, too, is dependent on the media's frames. In addition, this study looked at how Tara's alters influenced her family and her ability to function productively in society. Tara's actions play a role in shaping the audiences understanding of mental illness.

**Semiotics**

Semiotics involves the interpretation of verbal and nonverbal signs based on their cultural meaning. Semiologists study films, photographs, magazines etc. and worked to interpret the signs (images, music, text and linguistics) using semiotics. Signs are made up of two parts, a signifier and the signified. The sign's physical form (visual image, sound) is the signifier, and the meaning expressed by a sign is the signified. These two parts are inseparable and work together to construct social meanings. "Without visual images, an idea may be lost in a sea of words, while without words, an image may be lost to ambiguity (Panzaru, 2012)." Meanings of signs are not naturally instilled within us, but instead the meanings are culturally created. So, a meaning of a sign in one culture may have a different meaning in another.

In 2012, there was a study conducted on the representations of women in Nollywood, which is the Nigerian movie industry. This research used semiotics by looking at images of women and constructions of femininity within the Nigerian culture. With a better understanding of the culture, the researchers were able to view the gender roles and femininity in Nigerian literature and films of popular culture. They compared these images of woman to how they were perceived in reality, revealing the power of semiotics (Bryce, 2012). The researchers were concerned women in the media were not true accounts the reality. This study on Nigerian's cultural perceptions of women emphasizes the large impact semiotics can have on the public's view. Since signs in media have the capability to demonstrate the values of culture, the theory of semiotics will also be used in the analysis of *United States of Tara* to understand mental illness portrayals.

This study delves into the representations of Tara as a mentally ill person. Specifically, this essay looks at how Tara is dressed and her ability to function productively in society. This all communicates ideas and concepts to the audience about mental illness, either promoting social stigmas or disproving them. Therefore, the stereotypical images in the media have the ability to influence the public's opinion based on the signs associated with mental illness.

**Methodology**

This study is geared toward a deeper understanding of how mental illness is represented throughout television. This is accomplished through the usage of framing and semiotics as the theoretical framework. To conduct this research, the modern day

television program, *United States of Tara*, is analyzed. *United States of Tara* is chosen for this study because it has the potential of revealing changes in the negative social stigma of mental illness. When generating ideas for the research, it was difficult to find studies on recent media involving mental illness. Most of the television programs were from the twentieth century or earlier. With looking at a show made after 2005, it provided a modern outlook for relevance to today's time. There were three seasons of this show before it discontinued in 2011. This study examines all thirty-six episodes of the three seasons through a critical analysis, which were accessed through online streaming of Netflix. This analysis focuses upon not only the meaning of the text but also the social construction of meaning through the text (Avila-Saavedra, 2010). Each of the thirty-six episodes of *UST* were watched once to get bearing, and then a second time to transcribe important dialogue and evaluate significant images. Textual analysis is the method used to understand the underlying signs, symbols and meanings being conveyed. This method helps to gain an accurate depiction of what the show is communicating to the public; through the language used, the roles the characters played and the actions framed. Gathering the transcribed dialogue and screenshots, there is a process of reduction of the information to preliminary themes. This process involves reading over the text several times and reflecting upon what the phrases or statements revealed about a particular experience. Several key themes arose and were interpreted. The interpretation involved understanding the themes interlaced within the overarching picture. To collect, analyze and piece together the data, it took approximately two and a half months.

Research Questions

1. How is DID portrayed through Tara's actions?

2. What treatments does Tara use for her mental illness?

3. Is Tara's mental illness portrayed positively or negatively?

4. How is Tara represented physically as a person with a mental disorder?

**Character Overview**

This is an overview providing background knowledge of the main characters of *UST,* which will provide a basis toward better understanding of the scenes and plot described later in the essay.

**Tara Gregson** (main character)**:** Tara is the wife of Max Gregson and mother of Kate and Marshall Gregson. Tara has dissociative identity disorder, DID, or most commonly known as multi-personalities disorder. This disorder causes her to have many identities, also called alters. These personalities arise at inopportune times throughout the show. She experienced trauma at a very young age, which is where her mental illness stemmed as a barrier to protect herself.

**Max Gregson:** Max is Tara's devoted husband who owns a lawn care business. He loves Tara dearly. His unconditional love for Tara is displayed in his endless patience and true commitment of every family struggle encountered resulting from Tara's disease. Max stands by her side through thick and thin. It is later learned Max's father left him and his mother when he was younger because of his mother's mental illness, which explains his dedication to Tara.

**Kate Gregson:** Both Kate and Marshall are very intelligent children, learning how to survive in the world on their own. This is linked to the fact of their short lived childhood. They both had to grow up fast, finding themselves taking care of their parents all the time. Kate's character transforms throughout the show starting out as a rebellious and sexually active teenager, but after some foolish decisions she becomes a more responsible, respectable character who wants to chase after the world in away from her mother's alters.

**Marshall Gregson:** Marshall is also very intelligent like his sister. Marshall is viewed as having knowledge way beyond his years. This describes his character well because he is interests involves listening to vintage music, such as Billie Holliday and collecting old records. He is very organized, which is shown through his pristine room. Throughout the show, the audience learns Marshall is a homosexual. Marshall is characterized by his precise attention to detail. While everyone is solely caught up with their own lives, he seems to be the only one who notices misspellings in the newspapers and grammatical errors on television news reports. Marshall's character develops throughout the series. At first, he is devoted to protecting his mother, but later becomes really bitter about his life situation and eagerly wants to get out of his parents' crazy house.

**Charmaine Craine:** Charmaine is Tara's insecure sister whose sexual promiscuity gets her into a dilemma later in the season. Charmaine's character reflects the skeptics in the real world, and she often doubts the reality of Tara's disorder. For Charmaine's entire life, she remains in the shadows of Tara's disorder. Because of this, she appears to be jealous of Tara's misfortune; Charmaine plays the victim, when Tara is the victim.

**Narrative Overview**

*United States of Tara* takes place in Overland Park, Kansas. In the first season of *UST*, the audience becomes familiar with Tara and her alters. This television program is about how Tara manages to balance her family, career and everyday challenges from her mental illness.

DID is also known as multiple personalities disorder, and it is developed from severe prolonged trauma. In Tara's case, her DID stemmed from her half-brothers severe sexual abuse. The associated memories from enduring harmful actions causes a child to remove themselves from anything related to the trauma, in other words, to dissociate. This removal from trauma is distinguished by loss of consciousness, creating alternate personalities, called alters for short. Tara begins the show with four primary alters, but later develops additional alters as the show continues. Tara's original alters include T, Buck, Alice and Gimme. T is Tara's teenage alter who is depicted as sexually inviting, wearing clothing barely covering her body parts. T has a clearly visible g-string, uses vulgar language and enjoys shopping. Tara's second alter, Buck, is a male Vietnam War veteran. Buck wears round spectacles, smokes and drinks heavily. He is characterized as a stereotypical manly man. The alter Alice can be compared to a 1950s housewife. Alice is a domesticated woman and her motherly actions prove to be very helpful in many situations throughout the show. Gimme is the last of the initial alters. The alter Gimme is unknown for a long time, but Gimme's existence is foreshadowed in earlier episodes. Gimme is animalistic and uncivilized. Whenever presented in the series, Gimme has fits and is shown groaning, screaming while wildly running into things, messing up

organization. At first, Gimme only came out at night, but later Gimme is discovered by the family during the day.

Tara uses her alters as a defensive mechanism, which stemmed from molestation experienced at an earlier time. The alters act as a protective shield and help Tara when she is not strong enough to cope with normal, life situations. The show takes us through Tara's experiences of her mental illness and adequately depicts its effects on her, her family and those who she is around. If something stressful (such as people yelling at her, surprising events, or moments of uneasiness etc.) happened, Tara transitioned into one of her alters to help her through the situation. Helpful in many ways, Tara's alters sometimes came in handy, but they often disrupted her ability to live her life normally.

Tara has no recollection of her childhood, which is a result of her previous trauma. Her lack of memories affects her ability to recall important moments from the past. Tara's mental disorder does not help her memory either. During the show, Tara describes DID as "losing time." When Tara is in an altered state, she does not remember any of her actions. There are times when Tara does have coconsciousness with some alters but then later reverts.

In the second season, Tara questions her mother after Charmaine's unsuccessful wedding (Charmaine was left at the altar). Here, it is revealed that Tara's initial molester was her half-brother, Bryce, when she was around the age of five. Tara's mother put her and Charmaine into a foster home to protect them from their mentally ill brother Bryce.

In the final season of *UST*, Tara decides to enroll in Kansas University to finish her degree. While signing up for her abnormal psychology class, Tara meets her stubborn professor, Dr. Hattaras. Throughout the season, the two of them develop a unique

relationship. Once informed of Tara's DID condition, Dr. Hattaras wanted to study Tara. Because of Hattaras' skepticism of DID, he believed he could study DID from a new perspective. Tara was hesitant to work with Hattaras on his academic paper, but later gives into his persistence. Throughout the season, Tara begins to show underlying signs of a new personality. At first, this personality is only destructive to Tara. Tara begins cutting herself on multiple occasions and saying "you will not win." Later in the season, Tara's new alter, Bryce Craine, emerges full force. Her alter, Bryce Craine, starts to kill all of the other alters one by one, planning to eventually kill Tara. For the remainder of the season, Bryce continues his diabolical acts not only to Tara, but also others around him. Bryce stays much longer than the normal time of regular alters and finally leaves once Bryce starts wrestling Marshall and Max slams Bryce against the wall, causing Bryce to transition to Tara. Another major event that occurred within this season is that Tara tries to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge while Max is driving her to a mental facility. Luckily Tara survives, and both of them head back home. That night the family has a dinner and the next day Tara heads to Boston for psychiatric help.

**Actions during mental illness**

Much of framing involves not only what is shown to the audience, but also what is not shown. If a mentally ill character is shown only doing negative actions, but never any positive actions, then the audience will develop a skewed view of the mentally ill. This is especially true if the audience has never interacted with a mentally ill person, lacking firsthand knowledge to make valid judgments.

*Positive Depictions of Actions*

Screenwriter Diablo Cody depicts Tara as weak, with a low self-esteem and unable to fend for herself. Tara's inability to deal with intense moments of stress (such as people taunting or yelling at her) causes her alters to arise. Tara uses her mental disorder as a crutch that gives her strength to do and say things she would not do out of her altered state.

In *UST* there were many, difficult situations Tara could not handle on her own, which would cause her to transition. In Season 1: Episode 1, Tara drives by the school to drop off Kate's costume before the recital. Arriving at the school, Tara spots Kate's boyfriend hitting Kate. Kate is embarrassed and refuses her mom's help, causing Tara to transition into her alter, Buck. As a parent and a mother, it was only natural for Tara to want to protect her daughter from being physically shoved by her boyfriend. Buck taps into Tara's motherly instinct to protect Kate, but expresses it through Buck's alter personality. After Kate's dance recital, Buck is found fist fighting Kate's boyfriend in the middle of a circle. Buck is standing up for Kate, something Tara does not have the audacity to do without her alter's help.

What follows is an excerpt from Season 1: Episode 11 Snow. Marshall is furious with his mother because T makes out with Marshall's crush, Jason. Even though this is temporarily harmful to Marshall, T is trying to protect him from future heartbreak.

**Kate**: Do you even get what mom's alters do?

**Marsh**: Ruin my f***ing life.

**Kate**: No, they do stuff for mom. She was protecting you. Jason is nothing but a bi-curious church monkey, who is using you to find some edge.

**Marsh**: That's not true.

**Kate**: Ok, so maybe he will f*** some guys, and maybe you can get him to f*** you. But he is going to marry a girl, and he is never gonna love you the same way you love him. So, T came out to try and put a stop to it. (Marsh walks away)

Sometimes Tara's actions prove beneficial to her family members. Tara's alter Alice comes to the rescue several times in the show. Alice is helpful when Charmaine is struggling as a new mother. Charmaine is unable to sleep because her baby is crying constantly. Alice's motherly instinct knew the trick to make the baby stop crying. Alice turns on a vacuum cleaner, saying the noise mimics the mother's womb. Slowly but surely the baby's wailing stopped, providing Charmaine with relief.

*Negative Depictions of Actions*

There are other moments when Tara's alters were not helpful. In one episode, Tara transitions into T at the grocery store after hearing Charmaine cynically complain all day. As T, she exits the store with a case of beer and gets into her car ready to drive away. Charmaine stands in front of the car preventing T from leaving. T keeps bumping into Charmaine's pregnant belly, causing Charmaine's water to break and deliver her baby prematurely. In addition, Bryce is the most physically harmful alter present only during the last season. Bryce's actions are harmful to Tara and others. One climatic event is when Bryce tried to kill Dr. Hattaras by poisoning him with crab. Before this event, Bryce also cuts Tara's arm and makes Tara stick her finger down her throat to throw up her antipsychotic pills.

The alters are placed at the forefront of *UST;* the alters are framed through the repetitiveness of their presence. At least one alter would appear during each episode. The

actions of Tara's alters were framed to demonstrate their protectiveness for herself and her family. Tara's alters are able to tap into her own emotions and express them without filter. Tara holds her aggravation inside, utilizing her alters as a scapegoat for emotions. For the most part, Tara's mental disorder is displayed as a mechanism she develops to shield her and her family from harm. DID was Tara's response to stress. Whereas people without a mental disorder respond to stress with relieving activities such as exercise, an art form (music, drawing) or drinking alcohol, Tara finds her emotional outlet through her alters.

Because Tara's alters are a sign of weakness, the audience could generalize that people use their mental disorder as a survival technique to cope with everyday challenges. Tara is unable to remember what she did when her alters took her body, which may be why DID is characterized as losing time. Losing time, Tara is forgetting about her life's troubles during her altered states. As Tara was forced to bear prolonged child abuse from her half-brother Bryce, she desperately looked for way to escape the pain she was feeling. Her alters were this escape. Tara's true emotions were channeled through her alter's actions. Because Tara did not participate in the norm, by expressing her emotions in society's sanctioned ways, it was classified as a mental disorder.

**Therapist/no medication, religion**

Tara Gregson goes through many trials of treatment within the series. During the first season, the show mentions Tara is no longer taking pills for her disorder. From this, the audience assumes Tara did take pills at an earlier time. In this season, Tara is under the guidance of the therapist Dr. Ocean. Dr. Ocean always uses a soft tone of voice with

Tara, talking slowly and with patience. Tara works with Dr. Ocean until one day Dr. Ocean gives up on her.

**Ocean**: Given where you are in you treatment Tara, I think it might be time for you to see another therapist. One who has more experience with DID patients. I have discussed this with my clinical supervisor who agrees and we have come up with some recommendations together.

**Tara**: Hey! If you think it'll help to throw another therapist in the mix let's push even harder.

**Ocean**: You'd actually be seeing another therapist instead of me. This other doctor who I am thinking of runs an excellent program.

**Tara**: Wait, so you're breaking up with me?

**Ocean**: Technically it's a termination.

**Tara**: Oh god, that's even worse…You're just giving up on me.

**Ocean**: No Tara, it's not like that.

(Tara gives an unconvinced facial expression, rolling her eyes)

**Ocean**: Let me reframe this for you. It'll help if you think of this not as the end of our relationship. Think of it as a graduation from one stage of treatment to another and we still will have four more sessions together to help you with a transition.

**Tara**: Great. It is what I need, more transitions. (feeling betrayed)

At first, Dr. Ocean appears patient and willing to work toward getting Tara better. Although, when Max starts meeting with Dr. Ocean secretly, things start getting messy. The added pressure of Max's demands and Tara's complex alters frazzled Dr. Ocean,

leading to the severing of their relationship. The situation was becoming too complicated for Dr. Ocean to handle. Dr. Ocean's loss of control caused her to end therapy with Tara.

Toward the end of season 1, the family agrees Tara needs help, so she goes to the Gateway Trauma Recovery Program. There, her psychiatrist, Dr. Holden, pushes Tara to uncover the past. Tara meets with Trip Johansson, the person who raped her at boarding school. At this meeting, it is revealed that Tara's DID came before this incidence. Tara was transitioning well before her encounter with Trip. Tara's trauma was much deeper into her past than her boarding school experience. This becomes too much for Tara to handle and she decides to go back home.

At the beginning of the second season, Tara believes she is healed because her alters had not appeared for three months. Tara is back on antipsychotic medication and everything in their lives was going perfect, until one evening there is a loud gunshot heard throughout the neighborhood. Tara and Max Gregson's mysterious neighbor, Donald Hubbard, commits suicide. Tara becomes fascinated with the Hubbard house. Tara's curiosity with the Hubbard house triggers her to transition into her alters again. After a couple of episodes of Tara transitioning into her old alters, she soon develops a new alter.

Shoshana Shoenbam is a new alter introduced in the second season. When Max realizes Tara's alters resurfaced, he requests Tara to find help. Tara looks to her neighbors for suggestions on therapists in Kansas. Instead, they give Tara a book their therapist from New York wrote. The name of their therapist was Shoshana Shoenbam. As Tara starts reading the book, her new alter develops. Tara's alter Shoshana is Tara's new therapist. Shoshana is the only alter that Tara always had coconsciousness with all of the

time. Shoshana's character is enlightening to Tara, allowing her to access new thoughts and discoveries of her own life as well as Max's. With Shoshana and the Hubbard house combined, many family secrets of the past are revealed. Shoshana is always shown with a bright, mystical light behind her. Tara looks to Shoshana as an omniscient being, having all of the answers. Shoshana's office is within the Hubbard house, which may be one of the reasons that enabled Tara to uncover some of her lost memories.

**Max**: You know people who knew you used to ask me how we made it work. I'd tell them we are crazy in love and it was working, Tara, for seventeen years. But it is not f***ing working anymore.

**Tara**: I know it sounds insane, but I have been seeing therapist for decades and not one of them has given me the fraction of insight she (Shoshana) has.

**Max**: Tara, listen to me. SHE IS NOT REAL!

**Tara**: If the measure of being real is that she helps me figure things out that I can't unpack on my own, then she is real!

**Max**: Wow. Unpack what things?

**Tara**: Well, it is still foggy but I'm having memories after a lifetime of nothing! Can you believe that? And Shoshana thinks it is the Hubbard house that is bringing this up and making it happen.

**Max**: Oh, it is the Hubbard house. That's rich! Why the Hubbard house?

**Tara**: We don't know yet!

**Max**: Yeah.

**Tara**: She's had some pretty interesting things to say about you too.

**Max**: Oh yeah, like what?

**Tara**: She said you need me to be sick because it is the only thing holding us together.

Tara's memories from her childhood are a breakthrough because she never connects memories from her past. There is a charged, mysterious energy associated with the Hubbard house, triggering Tara to transition. The design of the Hubbard house is a 70s retro look and appears to be stuck in the past. This appearance links memories from Tara's childhood. The audience never figures out the mystery behind the Hubbard house, but it serves as a symbol of discovery of lost secrets, hence Tara's memories. These memories help steer her in the right direction of discovering more and more of her past.

In the third season, Tara and Dr. Hattaras, her professor of abnormal psychology, begin working together on a study of DID, using Tara as the main subject. The Co-Chair of the psychology department terminates Tara and Dr. Hattaras' work together after Tara's alter, Bryce, tries to poison Dr. Hattaras with crab. The Co-Chair suggests some therapists for Tara to look into in the future.

Although, Tara utilizes medication and therapy as her primary sources of treatment, she never once tries putting her trust into a higher power. In Season 1 Episode 4, Tara opens up speaking to her video diary:

> **Tara**: I don't believe in God. I wish I did. Alice (the alter) believes in God. I don't know what I believe in. Yes, I do. Faith. And art. Not that what I do is art or anything….Once in a while what you do for work is also what you do for love, and when that happens, it is heaven.

For some people, religion is viewed as a resource for healing. When the show mocks Christians and religion itself, it suggests the medicalization of the American society. This was not only shown through the ridiculing comments about God made by

the characters, but also through Tara's constant reliance on worldly, humanistic medicine. The Christians in *UST* are depicted as outsiders to the society with odd traditions and weird beliefs. Is Diablo Cody hinting at changes in the American society? According to Pew Research Center Surveys, the increase in the amount of adults who claim to be atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular has been steadily rising, from 15.3 % in 2007 to 19.6% in 2012 (Nones, 2012). Many people in America no longer identify themselves as part of a particular religion anymore. More and more attend church less frequently and attach less importance of religion to their lives. The researchers predict the number of people who are religiously unaffiliated will continue to increase due to the increase in generational replacement, with younger generations less likely to be affiliated with a religion. Also, the Western region of the United States contains more religiously unaffiliated people than the Southern regions.

In the last episode of the last season, the family is having one last dinner before Tara is taken off to see a doctor in Boston. The family dinner seems to be going well until Max flips out, blaming god for their problems:

> **Max**: What the f*** are we doing?! (Max punches the table) We are having a god damn party, while the universe is out there dreaming up new and devious ways to f*** us over. Look at this family! My beautiful wife who tries so hard to be a good person, good to other people and my children who have never done f***ing anything wrong to anybody, never be asked to be dragged into this! God, did you put us down here just so you could take a big f***ing s*** on our heads? Well, I want it to stop! (bangs chicken on the table) Whoever is up there listening, move on to somebody else! Because it is not f***ing funny, because it

is not f***ing fair and we deserve some f***ing mercy! (throws chicken across the room)

Throughout the UST television program, there is a theme of perpetual hopelessness. This theme is shown through the ineffective treatments Tara continuously tries in the hopes to heal her. The repetition of the different techniques Tara resorts to try and find a cure provides a salient frame, highlighting the medicalization of the American society. Tara looks to one useless therapist after another to fix her DID condition. Although the therapists are able to help her expose clues from her past she is never able to live alter-free. The alters always sneak back into her life, proving that Tara's DID was an innate part of her. Tara's alters are programmed within her for so long that it is impossible to completely eliminate them from her life. Even the antipsychotics Tara took within the second and third season do not help her. They serve as temporary relief, but the alters always resurface when more traumatic events occur.

**Bryce Craine Alter**

"I think what Max is referring to is the impossible paradox of you being up here and also down there mulched by worms."—Neil. The family captured Tara's alter Bryce and took him to the real Bryce Crain's tombstone.

Max's dedication to Tara was consistent throughout the show, Max being the only one who never gave up on her. Earlier in the series, Max worked with Tara as a project he thought he could fix. Max searched for the root of where Tara's DID stemmed, hoping if they knew where Tara's mental illness came from, then they could work toward Tara getting better. After some investigation, Max met with Tara's old roommate, Heidi, from

boarding school to find the name of the guy who raped her, Trip Johansson. However, it seemed the more information Tara found out the worse she became. Later in the series of UST, Tara found out her original molester was not Trip Johansson, but it was her half-brother, Bryce Craine. As an adult, Tara had no idea that Bryce even existed until she began to investigate her past. Somehow this newfound knowledge did not make Tara better but ultimately triggered her last alter, Bryce Craine. Bryce was the worse alter of all, characterized as violent and destructive. He was usually in scenes with dissonant music playing in the background. After the discovery of the Bryce Craine alter, Dr. Hattaras met with Tara and the Co-Chair of the psychology department at Kansas University to understand the meaning of the alter:

> **Co-Chair**: The relevant term here is abuser alter. It is a personality modeled on a primary abuser, caretaker, family member…This personality protects itself from the original abuse by, well, becoming the abuser. It's a paradox, the self turning against itself, which accounts for your cutting.

With Tara being a sexually molested child, *UST* portrayed an external force as the source of Tara's mental illness. From this, the audience could gather that people are not always born with their mental illness. Mental illnesses can be the result of known, damaging experiences as well. Prolonged exposure to repetitive or severe events such as child abuse is likely to cause the most severe and lasting effects (Trauma FAQs, 2013). In the case of DID, this mental disorder is a result of the evil actions people do to each other, having a lasting effect on others. Ironically, Bryce's alter comes out close to Halloween. Halloween is a holiday usually associated with horror, supernatural beings, death and evil. Bryce's actions essentially split Tara into pieces, making it difficult for anyone to

put her back together. With such mistreatment for so long as child, Tara had to find a way to survive through the difficult time. Tara's system of alters was her way of surviving. This system helped her to not remember the torment Bryce (her brother) was putting her through, wanting to forget what happened.

**Mental Illness Effects on Family and Friends**

Tara's mental illness not only affects her, but affects her family as well. Sometimes Tara's alters appear at inopportune times, when the family needs Tara the most. Interfering with the family's life, the alters do not allow any predictable structure. The family is always on their toes, looking out for Tara. Eventually, this negatively affects the children.

In Tara's altered states, she not only causes mischief, but also regularly misses Marshall's school functions. The inconvenience of the alters does not allow the children to enjoy their childhoods. They are always making sacrifices for their mother's disorder, and they never receive the same support system they offer Tara. Season 1 Episode 5, Tara transitions into T and ran off. While Charmaine is looking for T, Max goes to Marshall's mock trial at school barely making it there on time. Marshall can tell Max is anxious. Although Max is willing to stay to support his son, Marshall insists for Max to go look for Tara. At first Marshall is entirely devoted and protective for his mother, but after subsequent letdowns, Marshall begins to distance himself from Tara. In the last episode of the third season, Marshall tells how he feels to Kate:

> **Kate**: See, technically you aren't helping mom. You are helping me because I can't tell the difference between a bulb of garlic and a shallot. Oo, what's this?

**Marshall**: Uh, a cat turd.

**Kate**: Speaking of disgusting s*** heaps, what's this I'm hearing about you moving to Houston partner?

**Marshall**: Yeah.

**Kate**: Well, are you okay with that?

**Marshall**: I don't really care. What difference does anything make at this point?

**Kate**: That's it Moosh. That's all we got. Nothing to be sad or happy about, just it is what it is.

**Marshall**: You know, I want to shoot myself in the head when I think about mom trying to wipe away years and years of pain and disappointment with a hug or a kiss or a f***ing family dinner.

**Kate**: Well, she doesn't know what else to do.

**Marshall**: Here's the truth Kate. I don't have any room to give a s***. I'm finding it hard to care about her.

When compared to the beginning of the series, the dynamics drastically change within Marshall's character. Initially, Marshall is supportive for his mother. However, after many disappointments from the alters: T kissing Marshall's boyfriend, parents missing his mock trial, Bryce beating Marshall up etc., Marshall is left simply hopeless, believing his life will never get better. Toward the end, Kate and Marshall start to search for an escape out of their life.

This theme of escaping is not only demonstrated through Marshall and Kate's characters, but the whole family as well. Season 2 Episode 12, it is Charmaine's wedding day. As Charmaine is rushing to get ready for the wedding, Tara enters the room with news from their dad.

> **Charmaine**: Tara, do you know what today is? Today is my bullet train to a new life. Nick sails, Tara. I mean they have a sailboat. They are normal people and they are making room in their normal people group photos for me. If my body doesn't bling, if our dad doesn't walk me down the aisle, if my sister twitches at the last second then these normal people will know that there is something wrong with me, and I will never get the f*** out. (kisses Tara) I love you.
>
> Tara transitions into her childish alter Chicken.

Instead of acting like an adult during the wedding, Tara acts like a child, which causes Nick (Charmaine's fiancé) to leave Charmaine at the altar. Charmaine never gets her ticket into a new life, but instead is caught in the perpetual trap of Tara's DID. Tara's mental illness dragged the rest of the family down with her. They are all stuck trying to fix something they never broke.

Earlier in the show, Max is hopeful in believing he can fix Tara. His realization that there may be no fixing her becomes more of a reality as the series progresses. Max channels his frustrations in other places because he cannot aim his anger where it belongs. At the start of season two, Tara seems perfect, with no alters. As the alters begin to resurface, Tara does not tell Max until he is blindsided at the ice skating rink. There, Pammy, the bartender from Cat Fives (local bar), confesses her love to Buck over the intercom. This was Max's first time learning about Buck's love affair. After Max hears this information, he angrily leaves the rink and heads over to Sutley's home. Max beats Sutley up because he owes Max money. At first, Max is going to let Sutley slide. When Tara is not transitioning into her alters, Max believes people can change for the better. Therefore, once he learns Tara is secretly transitioning, Max loses all faith in people,

which triggers his doubtfulness of Sutley ever paying him back his money. This is demonstration of how Max feels unable to direct his anger because he does not know whether to be mad at Buck or Tara. Instead, the anger is directed to Sutley. Toward the end of the show, he begins to contemplate having to deal with Tara's DID for the rest of his life, which is something he never before considered. Although Max's commitment and love to Tara was admirable, people suggest for him to get out of the messy situation as fast as he can before he lost his own sanity.

Throughout UST, there are several other ways Tara's alters affect the family. If the family are not cautious of their actions, and put Tara in uncomfortable situations Tara would transition. The family treats Tara as a normal person. Charmaine vents to Tara, like sisters do, and people yell at Tara when they were upset. But, because of Tara's DID she is unable to cope with these situations without transitioning.

Season 1 Episode 1, Max mentions how he is disappointed in Kate for using the morning-after pills.

> **Max**: You know that bad surprises are a trigger for her.
>
> **Kate**: Dad, everything is a trigger lately. Why can't mom just be manic depressive like all the other moms?

When Tara's most violent alter Bryce comes out in the final season, the family takes extreme measures to protect themselves. Max begins stocking Buck's weapons in Charmaine and Neil's home. Marshall goes to live with Grandma Sandy until Max is finding it difficult to deal with Bryce alone. So, Max asks the children to come back home to help him. When Kate and Marshall do, they both stayed in Kate's room. Kate

and Marshall create a barricade around the doors of Kate's room so Bryce would not enter at night. These are drastic measures for the family to accommodate their mother.

Although Tara's alters are helpful, they pose an environment lacking in support for her children and husband. Her lack of support is framed through her inability to be there when her family needs her. For instance, Tara would miss a lot of Marshall's school functions. The children take on a lot of responsibilities at young ages due to the burden of Tara, which cause them to grow up too fast. In addition, *UST* frames Tara's disorder as a trap, which is signified by the family feels obligated to stick by Tara unable to move on with their lives. The strong support system the family provides Tara is in hopes she would get better one day. The family is so invested in Tara's life that they are not able to live a carefree life themselves. Tara's problems belong to the whole family. Even though the family tolerates Tara for a long time, it is clear they want to escape their lifestyle. This theme is present through the family characters; they are unable to fix something none of them broke.

**Broken pieces**

> "From birth, each of us sets out to discover who we really are, but when trauma occurs we create ways to survive. Often we split into pieces and abandon the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, boxing them up into tiny packages and tossing them away. Later, we spend our lives looking for these parcels, hoping we meet someone to help us find these lost splintered pieces of ourselves,"—Tara was reading the book written by Shoshana Shoenbaum.

Integration means to make whole by bringing all parts together. The idea of integration is prevalent throughout the entire series of *United States of Tara*. It is even found within the title of the show, *United States of Tara.* It is the concept that Tara is made up of different "states" or alters. Tara is shattered into different pieces when she suffers from her childhood trauma. These separate pieces of Tara became her alters. All through the show Tara is trying to put her pieces back together, essentially becoming one person rather than seven. Tara's alters are boxed up different pieces of herself, pushing out any vulnerability. The alters protect Tara from harm ever since she was a child. Tara's ability to dissociate from traumatic (or stressful) events every time the alters arose caused her lack of memory. Although Tara does not remember the details of her past, her alters do. The alters experience things Tara does not want to see. Even though Tara does not want to see, the alters go through their own experiences. Each alter stores its own set of secrets. The secrets the alters hold contribute to the difficulty for Tara to integrate because she is unable to piece together her past history. If Tara is able to make sense of the alter's secrets, it would enable Tara to work toward integration by bringing the pieces together. Integration is similar to the idea of a puzzle; when put together, everything looks and functions correctly, but if something breaks the puzzle apart, there is confusion, and the inability to understand the meaning of the entire picture. Even though Tara's mother, Beverly Craine, knew of Tara's past, Beverly's decision to be secretive inhibits Tara's ability to recover. It all comes together in Season 3 Episode 4 when Tara has an intervention with all of her alters. Tara takes control and decides to make a contract with her alters, having each alter write up what they value.

**Tara**: I have spent far too long babying you, all of you. You act like spoiled brats and then you leave me holding the bag. So, we are going to draw up a contract. All of you will write down what is important to you and what you want out of life. And then I, only I, will decide how we go about it. I am dissolving the United States of Tara and declaring myself king. If you guys don't like it, you can kiss my ass because I will go back on the drugs, and you guys will go back into the closet. I hear by declare my benevolent dictatorship to be in full effect. Long live the king! (bangs hands on the table)

Once she transitions out of her state, Tara realizes that she is in class during her test and her alters have written the contract all over her body. All of the testing time has passed, and Dr. Hattaras is staring at her from the front of the lecture hall.

**Tara**: I'm crazy. I'm f***ing crazy.

The Declaration of Independence is created so Tara would have an organized system for her alters to follow, rather than a discombobulated mess. This system works for a while. Tara allows the alters to take control of her body when they needed it, but they return it when done. Tara claims she never had that sort of system work before. This contract proves helpful because the alters arise when necessary and left too according to the guidelines that are in place, that is until Bryce enters the picture. Tara needs a contract to control her dissociation while people without DID have the ability to turn on and off when they dissociate. People without DID handle breaking away from reality differently (instead of drawing, drinking beer, watching television etc.). Everyone needs an outlet with time to recharge and handle stress.

Anytime people go through a traumatic event, it shocks them. It causes them to crack, physically, mentally and spiritually. A person undergoes a traumatic event when their emotional or physical well-being is threatened. Traumatic experiences range from one-time rape, natural disasters, death of a loved one to prolonged events such as captivity or child abuse. One characteristic commonly known to evoke trauma-related disorders in adults is the history to prior traumatization, like chronic child abuse. According to National Center Brief, sixty percent of adults report experiencing abuse or other difficult family circumstances during childhood (Childhood Trauma, 2012).

Everyone's response to trauma varies. Some people are able to recover from the trauma perfectly fine whereas some remain damaged from its effects. One person may appear okay in public while battling the effects of trauma inside. Although with time, this person picks up the shattered pieces and pulls themselves back together. Similar to a mirror, once broken, a mirror can never go back to its original, pristine condition; the cracks will always be visible. Even though the cracks remain, some people push through these difficult times and move forward with their lives. Being broken down and then later finding the courage to move on is how humans are humbled and become stronger people. For other people, like Tara, the cracks in the mirror remain shattered, having long-lasting effects on a person's ability to develop.

A person's response to trauma is dependent on their environmental factors, family setting and age of when they endured the abuse. Infants, toddlers and young children are most vulnerable when it comes to trauma, witnessing family violence or experiencing assault by a sibling (Trauma FAQs, 2013). Starting as a toddler and young child, Tara suffers prolonged sexual abuse from her step brother, Bryce. Because of a child's reliance

on their parents for protection, a child can feel helpless if support is not provided. Tara's mother, Beverly, does not provide emotional support to Tara, but instead sends Tara and her sister to a foster home. At such a young age, toddlers lack the cognitive reasoning to interpret an event accurately. Because Beverly does not emotionally support Tara, Tara is left to interpret the meanings of the interactions, forming her own assumptions from the traumatic events. Not able to find outside sources for support and protection, Tara builds her support system. Beverly's unwillingness to protect Tara left Tara feeling weak. This results in Tara's inability to move forward from the traumatic experience.

The concept of shattered pieces is the signifier and the signified is the damage of trauma can be so terrible there is no chance of recovery, which is what happened to Tara. Tara continues to be shattered into pieces, remaining helpless to put them back together. This is representative of people with mental disorders that are caused by trauma. The audience can deduce that people are not always born with mental illnesses, but traumatic events trigger mental illness too. The abuser can have a lasting effect on a young victim's growth and development. This can leave the victim weak and incapable of coping with challenging situations in the future. Therefore, with no other support options, Tara's split into pieces creating the imaginary alters as an undeveloped coping skill for comfort, which stayed with her well into adulthood.

**Representations of the Mentally Ill**

Tara is always shown to be an attractive woman. Nothing about Tara's physical appearance suggests mental illness, especially when compared to the ways it was depicted in past media. Mentally ill people have a history of being associated with

unkempt, animal-like, destructive, demons and mentally retarded images while restrained in shackles (Nairn, 2007). Tara's attire mostly includes jeans paired with a cardigan or a nice dress. She also looks well groomed. Even when Tara goes away to the mental facilities, she is depicted as a normal person. After all, isn't that what she was? A normal person…

> "The thing I love about Tara is that it is bringing more awareness to the general public beyond the mental health community. I realize that some of it is sensationalized but it makes people want to watch and they are talking about it. The sooner more people talk about it the less stigma there will be attached to it and people with mental illnesses will be treated more like people with physical illnesses. The more work that we do towards that the better it is for everybody."—Leah Peterson

Leah Peterson, a woman with DID, provides her own insight to help produce the show. Peterson's statement demonstrates one of the main goals of the show. UST is increasing the awareness so mental disorders can become less stigmatized and more commonplace. In the past, it was uncouth to discuss such matters, but organizations are using media as a vessel to make mental illness mainstream. As an everyday mother, sister and friend, Tara becomes a relatable character, transcending past the previous stigmas. People are more likely to listen to her story because the show depicts Tara's situation as trauma that could affect anyone.

Tara is a painter and interior decorator but did not have a steady white collar job. Even though Tara's alters present themselves at inconvenient times, the audience does see spurts of productiveness from Tara. At the end of season three, Tara manages to

complete her degree from Kansas University. Another task she is able to accomplish is the mural for Tiffany's house. Despite Tara's mental illness, she is able to maintain her focus long enough to finish a project. As Tara is working on her mural, Max comes into the room and starts to distract her.

> **Tara**: I'm sorry. I have to get these concepts marked up. I'm actually being productive here for once.
>
> **Max**: I'm productive, do me.
>
> **Tara**: Honey, I'm in the zone right now. It's kind of what I need right now, ya know, a chance to show that I can be <u>functional</u>, create and contribute something off my meds.

One of the shows goals is to increase the awareness of mental illness. The producers of UST make mental illness more mainstream in today's society. This is shown throughout Tara's mainstream wardrobe. The fact that Tara visually dresses like a normal woman is a signifier working with the signified, proving people with mental illnesses are able to blend into society. The mentally ill are everyday people and interact with others on a daily basis. People with mental illnesses cannot be identified simply by their appearance.

**Discussion**

Diablo Cody frames Tara's alters not only doing troubling actions but doing good ones too. This shows that although Tara's alters were problematic at times, the alters are useful at others. Tara's alters justify reasons for her actions because she felt she did not have the power to do without them.

This same weakness is what she felt as an abused child. As a child, Tara is forced to hold her emotions within never learning how to develop proper outlets. Tara's inability to develop is shown as an adult because Tara never stands up for herself when people would taunt her. However, when Tara transitions she is able to say and do things she would not normally do. Tara uses her alters to survive, to help her maneuver through whatever challenges she encounters. Even though the alters are Tara's survival technique, Tara is on an endless search to integrate.

There is a continuous pattern of Tara's therapists giving up on her or Tara giving up on herself. This pattern shows that maybe there is not a cure for mental disorder and quite possibly the only thing people can do is nurture it with therapy and a strong support system. Additionally, the family often uses God's name in vain and mimic the idea of religion, pointing to religious people as outcasts from regular society. This idea is consistent with how people are becoming less religious and less reliant on a deity for their problems, but instead depending on worldly, humanistic aspects of medicine. Tara never once put her faith in God, which could have potentially given her insight and hope that a human source could not provide. The alter Shoshana is depicted as a deity, with the mystical light always behind her and through Tara's belief that Shoshana is the only therapist that ever helps her to get better. Shoshana's continuous coconsciousness supports Shoshana's omniscient knowledge that is able to help Tara tune into some of her inner feelings and memories. However, Shoshana never helps Tara integrate. The idea that Tara's character was not religious communicated to the audience about the increase in medicalization of the American society. Medicalization was framed by its

repetitiveness throught *UST*. All of the useless treatments Tara tried in hopes to integrate were signifiers that represented the increase in medicalization of the American society.

Tara's alters often were posed as an inconvenience to the family. Because the family members were so invested in Tara's life, they were unable to progress with their own lives. Even though they all wanted to escape, they were stuck. The family could not find their way out of the trap of Tara's mental illness. Tara's physical appearance demonstrated that the representations of the mentally ill people in the media are changing.

When coming in contact with a mentally ill person, there is no obvious distinction. Tara was represented as a well groomed woman who had an ordinary wardrobe. In addition, Tara was shown fully capable to get a degree and complete projects on her own. This proved her functionality as a person. Similar to anyone else, Tara could do anything she set her mind to. Tara's desire to do something with her life was displayed in graduating from college and completing Tiffany's mural.

*United States of Tara* was the first television series ever produced with Dissociative Identity Disorder as its focus. Tara's DID was placed in a prominent symbolic space throughout the show. This show demonstrated not only the effects of Tara's DID on her life and her family's, but it also showcased the cause of DID. Out of the different types of trauma, interpersonal violence tends to be one of the most traumatic events because it is disruptive to a person's fundamental sense of trust and attachment (Trauma FAQs, 2013). This is because interpersonal violence is seen as intentional rather than "an accident of nature." Bryce's abuse debilitated Tara from handling future traumatic events in her life, exhibiting the lasting, harmful effects chronic childhood

abuse can have on its victims. Experiencing abuse as a child stunted Tara's psychological development. Tara was shattered from the abusive experiences, hence the creation of alters. Because of Tara's young age, her brain was not mature enough to integrate what occurred (Trauma FAQs, 2013). Her confusion caused her to develop a coping mechanism. As a child, Tara was not provided with quality support after suffering such mistreatment. Tara's alters tacitly did the same thing to her family. Although Tara internally created a system of support for herself, her difficulty to handle stressful situations caused her alters to arise at inopportune times. This left Tara's family hanging when they needed her the most, even though the family provided Tara with strong support. Children are more susceptible to developing trauma-related disorders than adults because their brains are not mature enough to integrate what happened to them. Events that are intense, sudden, and unpredictable, extremely negative, and evoke severe helplessness and loss of control are more difficult to integrate (Trauma FAQs, 2013). This difficulty was shown throughout the show. Tara spent most of the show trying to figure out what happened to her. The everyday situations Tara encountered with her mental illness were meant to provoke discussions among the audience; conversations that were heavily stigmatized in the past. *UST* promotes mental illness awareness trying to make its situations and people relatable to the public. If the audience has knowledge about mental illnesses, then mental illness would become less stigmatized and more mainstream.

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